

## 8

## ADVOCACY

Advocacy can help gain new and increased resources, as well as change local policies or laws to better combat homelessness in the community. Advocacy is defined as the act or process of supporting a cause or proposal. People can engage in a variety of activities to advocate and engage local lawmakers to bring needed change.

The CoC should actively seek to enhance advocacy for homelessness services through the following actions:

- 8.A Public Education and Community Engagement Initiative
- 8.B Updated Cost of Homelessness Study
- 8.C Expand Samaritan Program

### 8.A) PUBLIC EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT INITIATIVE

A public awareness initiative is a marketing effort that increases public awareness and recognition of a problem. These initiatives target many people in the community to generate specific outcomes. They can contribute to policy changes by putting increased pressure on policymakers and encouraging the community to act against the problem. These initiatives further inform the community by providing information, education, and solutions on the issue, which is vital in creating actions to make change.

Homelessness impacts our social and economic systems. Strengthening advocacy to fight the root causes of homelessness while also addressing the shortcomings of the current assistance services is fundamental to reducing and ending homelessness in the community.

#### COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Community engagement needs a coordinated, ongoing process to build relationships and establish trust among diverse and representative stakeholders such as residents, community groups, faith-based groups, racial, ethnic and cultural groups, volunteer and outreach groups, and business and economic development groups

Engagement events should have a clear purpose and mission. Communication materials should be jargon free and available in accessible formats and alternative languages. In-person events provide residents the opportunity to discuss the issues firsthand. Case studies of how the issue or plan is likely to affect different residents and the community overall can be impactful. Publicize events using existing community networks and identify opportunities to combine events for more impact.

## Strategy Description

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Many key stakeholders and participants of the planning sessions discussed the need for more unified messaging and initiatives intended to engage and educate the community. Many stakeholders noted the importance of telling stories about who is impacted by homelessness and the ways individuals and families have successfully exited homelessness into permanent and stable housing.

In addition to information on the causes of homelessness, stakeholders also stated that some messaging could be tied to cost avoidance, return on investment and the economic impact of homelessness in the community. Stakeholders believed that this sort of messaging could help secure additional funding streams for the strategies described in this Action Plan.

Most every homeless services organization in OKC has staff responsible for public information. The CoC and these organizations should develop a public information committee (PIC) to develop unified messaging to increase public awareness and community engagement on issues surrounding homelessness in OKC. Messaging may address topics such as available homelessness services and resources, who experiences homelessness in the community like families and children, tenant rights and eviction diversion, and the funding necessary to combat homelessness in OKC.

In addition to creating united messaging, the PIC should work with local media to promote the positive outcomes associated with this Action Plan.

The PIC may also create marketing materials, presentations, social media advertisements, and arrange community engagement events or townhalls. Public education and community engagement events could be coordinated with fundraising events during National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness Week, or other seasonal occasions.

## NATIONAL HUNGER AND HOMELESSNESS AWARENESS WEEK

Each year, during the week before Thanksgiving, the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Student Campaign Against Hunger and Homelessness (NSCAHH) co-sponsor National Hunger and Homelessness Awareness week. During this week, college and community organizations, communities and cities take part in a nationwide effort to bring awareness to the problems of hunger and homelessness.

David Pirtle, from the Faces of Homelessness Speakers Bureau, points to increased awareness as the reason for increased participation in the Hunger and Homelessness Awareness week. The success in participation was said by both David Pirtle and Michael Stoops, director of community organization for the National Coalition for the Homelessness, to be attributed to the combination of public education, literature, lobbying, and working with the natural idealism of young people.

The NSCAHH also operates under the mission that advocacy is vital in importance to ending homelessness. The NSCAHH works with a coalition of students and various community members across the county to end hunger and homelessness through education. They educate students through workshops, conferences and training sessions on campuses across the county. The NSCAHH is currently the largest student network, with 600 participating campuses nationwide.

[https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/homelessness-awareness;](https://www.samhsa.gov/homelessness-programs-resources/hpr-resources/homelessness-awareness)

<https://www.learningtogive.org/resources/national-student-campaign-against-hunger-and-homelessness>

Issues, initiatives and services that could be promoted could include.

- ❖ 211 as a referral resource
- ❖ The Diversion Hub
- ❖ The Curbside Chronicle
- ❖ The Samaritan App
- ❖ Tenant rights versus laws favoring landlords
- ❖ Zoning changes allowing for more flexibility for urban areas to develop affordable housing
- ❖ Medicaid expansion
- ❖ Increasing the minimum wage
- ❖ Establishing a jobs program like the Civilian Conservation Corp.
- ❖ “Ban the Box” (The box which requires applicants to indicate incarceration history on housing or job applications)
- ❖ Support for House Bill 3710 (Bill giving more rights to tenants in cases of eviction)
- ❖ Need for public transportation
- ❖ Ending bad check restitution programs
- ❖ Ending cash bail
- ❖ Ending incarceration for failing to pay fines or fees
- ❖ Funding the Indigent Defense Program
- ❖ Awareness of the harms done by clearing camps

## Recommended Actions

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1. Convene implementation group, determine Committee membership and chairs.
2. Develop communications plan with policies, including specific programs that will be promoted, policy issues, a calendar of annual events that most programs collaborate on to promote, how to address controversial subject matter, and how to coordinate release of information to ensure a message stays active and identify performance measures.
3. Determine times of year for townhalls and public meetings; develop execution plan as well as marketing materials.
4. Launch public awareness and community engagement initiative and track outcomes.

## Implementation Group

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- Homeless Alliance (Kinsey Crocker)
- City Care (Rachel Freeman)
- Salvation Army (Traci Jinkens)
- Mental Health Association Oklahoma (Jacob Beaumont & Whitney Cipolla)
- Frontline Church (Kori Hall)
- CoC Lead Agency (Oklahoma City Homeless Services)



## Possible Performance Measures

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1. Number of townhalls and public meetings
2. Number of workshops
3. Effectiveness of marketing materials and outreach (policy or law changes, tax abatements or other positive impacts on social service programs, housing programs and homelessness services)
4. Amount of fundraising dollars received
5. Number of new community organizations supplying their information to 211 for referral services
6. Increase in support for specific initiatives that address homelessness or affordable housing
7. Increase in sales of Curbside Chronicle and other Curbside ventures
8. Increase in Samaritan users

## 8.B) UPDATED COST OF HOMELESSNESS STUDY

Various studies conducted by communities across the United States document the costs of homelessness. In general, a person experiencing chronic homelessness costs taxpayers about \$35,578 per year. These costs are reduced by almost 50% when that person lives in supportive housing. Supportive housing costs about \$12,800 per unit, making the net savings roughly \$4,800 per year.<sup>28</sup> Other specific studies have found:

- ❖ **Asheville, North Carolina:** 37 homeless men and women cost the City and County over \$800,000 each year over a three-year period. The total costs included \$120,000 for 280 episodes of EMS services, and \$425,000 in hospitalization costs.
- ❖ **West Virginia:** A study conducted by West Virginia University (WVU) and the West Virginia Coalition to End Homelessness found that 267 persons experiencing homelessness who received care at WVU Ruby Memorial Hospital over a one-year period incurred \$5,979,463 in service costs, including 785 emergency department visits totaling \$1,128,036 and 257 inpatient stays totaling \$3,743,699.
- ❖ **Missoula, Montana:** In 2009, the emergency department of St. Patrick Hospital's emergency room served 514 people experiencing homeless who incurred \$3,028,359 in charity care for their 1,219 separate visits to the ER.
- ❖ **Minnesota:** The Minnesota Supportive Housing and Managed Care Pilot program found that homeless single adults with highly complex needs such as mental illness, substance use disorders or trauma used about \$13,954 per year in services before entering a PSH program.<sup>29</sup>

The City of Oklahoma City Planning Department commissioned Spangler & Associates to conduct a Cost of Homelessness Study in 2009.<sup>30</sup> The Study covered the period from April 1, 2009 to March 31, 2010 with over 40 agencies and organizations contributing data. The key findings included:

- ❖ The total cost of homelessness was \$28,746,094.
- ❖ Emergency shelters and hospital emergency rooms combined accounted for more than 50% of the overall costs.
- ❖ The cost of law enforcement (county jail and police) and first response (fire and Emergency Medical Services Authority) was \$2,581,252.
- ❖ One chronically homeless man cost more than \$160,000 during the one-year study period in emergency room visits, jail and police interactions, and EMSA transports. He was not served in the homeless system during that time.
- ❖ 59% of the dollars that were spent came from private sources (individuals, foundations, hospitals, faith-based organizations, United Way, etc.), and 41% came from public sources (federal, state and local government).

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<sup>28</sup> <http://endhomelessness.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Cost-Savings-from-PSH.pdf>

<sup>29</sup> <https://files.hudexchange.info/resources/documents/H2-Innovative-Treatment-Housing-and-Service-Partnerships.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Spangler J & A Larason Niblett, Spangler & Associates, Inc. (2010). *Oklahoma City Cost of Homelessness Study 2009-2010*.



## Strategy Description

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Since the previous study was completed a decade ago, the Task Force should commission an updated Cost of Homelessness Study to better understand the economic impact of homelessness in the City.

## Recommended Actions

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1. Implementation group should establish a Cost Study Subcommittee to develop a request for proposal (RFP) or quote to secure an updated Cost of Homelessness Study.
2. Develop the RFP, review submitted proposals and select a vendor.
3. Work with the vendor to secure the necessary data and information to develop the Cost of Homelessness Study.
4. Review the final Cost of Homelessness Study and communicate the findings to City Council, OKC residents, business and economic development groups, and other key stakeholders.
5. Work with the PIC to incorporate the findings into the public education and community engagement plan.

## Implementation Group

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- Mental Health Association Oklahoma (Greg Shinn)
- Homeless Alliance (Meghan Mueller)
- OU Health Sciences (Halley Reeves)
- CoC Lead Agency (Oklahoma City Homeless Services)

## Possible Performance Measures

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1. Develop RFP
2. Vendor selection
3. Receive final Cost of Homelessness Study by determined date.

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## 8.C) EXPAND SAMARITAN PROGRAM

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Samaritan is an app that shows the story and goals of a person experiencing homelessness in the city and provides a way for residents who have the app to donate funds to support the person's exit out of homelessness. The app is free, and the program was launched locally by City Care in 2020.

City Care will offer individuals experiencing homelessness smart wallets, called "beacons". Beacon-holders work with City Care case managers to set goals and can access donated funds by reaching them. Beacons are reactivated as individuals attend their medical or other appointments. Samaritan app users can write letters of encouragement and well wishes, as well as provide job opportunities to beacon-holders. Beacons also serve as a form of electronic identification and will securely store documents such as insurance cards, state identification or work permits. Planning group participants indicated that they think the Samaritan program could help create a better understanding of homelessness by connecting directly with people experiencing it.

### Strategy Description

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The Task Force should monitor the outcomes of City Care's beacon tags pilot program over the next year to determine expansion opportunities. Should the program prove effective, the Task Force can work with City Care to expand the program the following year.

### Recommended Actions

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1. The Task Force should monitor the outcomes of the Samaritan pilot program over the next year. If the program proves effective, the Task Force and City Care may wish to convene relevant stakeholders on how best to expand the program.
2. Secure funding for the Samaritan program as appropriate.
3. Expand the Samaritan program and track outcomes.

### Implementation Group

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- City Care
- CoC Lead Agency (Oklahoma City Homeless Services)

### Possible Performance Measures

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1. Number of beacon-holders
2. Number of Samaritan app users
3. Amount of funds donated per beacon-holder
4. Number/percent of beacon-holders housed
5. Demographics of the beacon-holder housed
6. Length of time the beacon-holder stays housed

